

ATSDR deems mine's easy access a public health hazard

Report also shows onsite contamination is an indeterminable public health hazard based on lack of adequate information.

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Residents' push to mitigate concerns regarding the contaminated Anaconda Mine Site west of town recently received federal backing following a health consultation report from the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR) released for public comment last week.

"Easy access to the Yerington Anaconda Mine Site in Yerington, (NV), is a public health hazard," the ATSDR press release says.

This ATSDR release comes the same day Yerington Community Action Group Contact Peggy Pauly approached the Lyon County Board of Commissioners requesting the board to back residents, via resolution or other means, in asking for better site perimeter security. Commissioner Chairman Bob Milz said the board could not debate the issue Thursday, as it was presented during public participation rather than as an agendized item; however, he said the board would take the request under consideration.

The issue of site security has been hotly discussed at several meetings, including a November 2005 mine site stakeholder meeting where Pauly presented pictures of local teens crossing the existing barbwire fence and playing around on-site. It has also been previously said several physical hazards exist onsite and unauthorized personnel are prohibited from entering. Pauly also presented said pictures to the County Commission Thursday.

"The agency (ATSDR) says current barriers are inadequate to restrict access of unauthorized persons to high-hazard areas at the site," the release says.

The report summary, from which the release is based, goes on to say, "The mine and ore processing facility also present significant physical hazards. This site represents an attractive nuisance for area children and is easily accessible due to inadequate fencing."

As a recommendation regarding this concern, the ATSDR included a recommendation to regulatory agencies saying, "Improve site fencing and hazard signage to better restrict public access. Emphasize limiting access to the high-hazard former processing areas."

In an Associated Press article by reporter Scott Sonner, it notes site managers Atlantic Richfield Company (ARCO) officials earlier refused requests by residents and the EPA to fence off the site; however, Jim Sickles, EPA's site manager for the mine, said Friday they were close to reaching an agreement, which would see the company upgrade site security and build a four-foot high, wire mesh fence with two-feet of barbed wire on top around much of the site.

Sickles said of the ATSDR report; it "raises some worthwhile technical points."

The report also goes on to say the current dust monitoring stations operating around the site "are not adequate to evaluate peak events (high-wind storms)." This has also been an ongoing concern. Information presented at previous CAG meetings has indicated the monitors, which run for a 24-hour period every sixth day (based on a national program schedule), have not been in operation during several, if any, large dust-carrying wind storms in the area.

ATSDR is part of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The agency's involvement with the mine cleanup is to work with EPA Region 9 and other agencies' data to help determine if public health is at risk based on contaminants and potential pathways. Their assessments, including consultations on pathways such as water and air, help determine if contaminants located onsite exist in numbers high enough to cause public health concern.

ATSDR is not in a position to take additional samples, enforce work or issue medical diagnosis/treatment. The limit of their authority comes in the form of recommendations to the potentially responsible party and the EPA. Although their enforcement power is limited, the agency's recommendations are followed more times than not.

The agency was originally requested to perform a public health assessment regarding the mine via the Yerington Paiute Tribe in July 2004. The intent was to determine what, if any, health effects mine contamination could have on Tribal residents living near the site. A similar request came from the CAG in March 2005.

In response, the ATSDR, based out of Atlanta, responded with evaluation of existing data and performance of public sessions to determine the communities concerns. These were performed both in the YPT Gymnasium and the Yerington branch of the Lyon County Library.

Other conclusions drawn in their recent report include:

- Off-site, short-term exposure to airborne contaminants downwind of the site is an indeterminate public health hazard, meaning critical air monitoring information is currently not available
- Mine operations have contaminated groundwater, which has migrated off-site. Down-gradient domestic wells are contaminated with uranium and arsenic; however, available groundwater monitoring data are not adequate to determine whether these contaminants are site-related
- Tailings piles and evaporation ponds are potential sources of airborne particulates. These particles are only likely to become airborne during peak wind events. Current air monitoring programs designed to assess long-term average conditions are not adequate to evaluate peak events.
- Ongoing air and groundwater monitoring programs have significant limitations for assessing potential past and future exposures to the off-site community
- Present contaminants include airborne respiratory irritants such as sulfates and sulfides and groundwater contaminants include arsenic and uranium.

The ATSDR report summary indicates several general health concerns voiced by the community (i.e.

waterborne and respiratory health complications) are plausible based on types of site contamination.

"Some of the specific disease concerns communicated to, or observed by ATSDR staff, are plausible health outcomes for contaminants present in the YAM (Yerington/Anaconda Mine) site area," the report says.

Although the ATSDR cannot make a medical diagnosis, the agency has initiated health education training for Yerington's medical community to improve medical diagnosis of potential contaminant exposures.

"Further evaluation of potential contaminant-specific exposures will be conducted in the air and groundwater health consultations," the report says.

The new report "really validates some of the concerns we have been raising for a number of years and underscores the need for EPA to take some decisive steps," YPT Tribal Chairman Wayne Garcia told the Associated Press Friday. "We'd like to see a lot more monitoring going on."

The ATSDR press release lists recommended actions for residents and agencies performing site remediation. Aside from better fencing, these include:

- People receiving bottled water should continue receiving and using this water for drinking and cooking. Base on measured contaminant concentrations, non-potable uses of well water for bathing, cleaning and irrigation are not a health hazard and may be continued
- Collect additional off-site groundwater monitoring data to assess the off-site distribution of site-related contaminants. Improve ongoing domestic well sampling by developing an agency-approved sampling and analysis plan
- People with private wells in Mason Valley should have their water tested to ensure that uranium and arsenic concentrations are at safe levels
- Ongoing air monitoring programs should target contaminant loads in peak wind events. Add sulfate (or total sulfur) to the list of measured chemicals.

The health consultation is available for public review and comment through March 10. Also, the Dynamic Action on Wells Group (DAWG), which has previously combated some claims made regarding site geological information, plans to issue a response to the ATSDR report later this month.

Residents are encouraged to make comments and may review the report at the Yerington branch of the Lyon County Library located at 20 Nevin Way or at the Yerington Paiute Tribal Office at 171 Campbell Lane north of town.

Comments should be mailed to: ATSDR Records Center, 1600 Clifton Road, N.E. (MS E-60), Atlanta, GA 30333. Also, comments may be provided via email at: ATSDRRecordsCenter@cdc.gov with the "subject" being: YAM Site HC.

More information regarding the consultation may be obtained via telephone from Youlanda Outin at 1-888-422-8737 or via Regional ATSDR Representative Libby Vianu at (415) 947-4319.

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